

BOOK REVIEW

The United States of Belgium: The Story of the First Belgian Revolution, by Jane C. Judge (Leuven: Leuven U.P., 2018; pp. 310. €55).

The Austrian Netherlands were the jewel in the crown of the Habsburg Monarchy. The Bourbon dynasty spent massive resources trying, unsuccessfully, to wrest these provinces away from their rivals for the better part of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In comparison with the heretical Bohemians and unruly Hungarians, the Flemish and Wallonian inhabitants of these provinces were content. They paid their taxes, remained staunchly Catholic and collaborated with the imperial bureaucracy. In 1779 they remitted their contributions for the ill-considered War of the Bavarian Succession on time. Habsburg princes, in return, guaranteed the religious, fiscal and legislative autonomy of Brabant and the other Estates. The many micro-estates of the Austrian Netherlands were bewilderingly complex and cumbersome, even by the standards of the old regime. Jurisdictional complications, administrative inefficiency and slowness were part and parcel of the realities of these pre-modern institutions. From an outside perspective, they seemed the most unlikely area of Europe to erupt into revolution. It took the neurotic Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II's reforms to make the provinces explode into open rebellion in 1789. However, unlike the better known events taking place next door in France, this was not a radical revolution, but rather a moderate one. It eventually fell apart on the issue of whether this loose agglomeration of heterogeneous provinces represented a nation with central authority and institutions.

Jane Judge is to be complimented for providing a gripping narrative of this little-known story and for her insightful analysis of the political thinking that lay behind this revolution. Brabant's refusal to yield to its Habsburg prince has been sorely neglected by Anglo-Saxon scholarship. Convincingly, the author also places this unlikely revolution in its international dimension. Clearly, the denizens of the Austrian Netherlands looked to the nascent United States of America for inspiration. They deployed their own declaration of independence, established the *États Belges Unis* in January 1790 and created a congress that attempted, in vain, to create national institutions to safeguard this hard-won freedom. The irony is that many deputies and revolutionaries in principle were not opposed to Joseph II's goals. It was a question of style rather than substance. If only the Habsburg Emperor had negotiated or discussed his plan for religious, administrative and fiscal reforms he might have found fertile ground in the enlightened public sphere. The great virtue of this book is its exhaustive research into the pamphlet and periodical literature of the Austrian Netherlands. Some excellent caricatures and prints are deployed to good effect throughout the text too. This study provides a very good sense of the growing urgency and political thinking that underlay the decision of these provinces to resist encroachments on their historic liberties. The process was gradual and, even once the rebellion had exploded, the liberal *Vonckistes* and conservative *Statistes* bickered about the future of the United States of Belgium. The unity of the estates proved as ephemeral as that of the national assembly in France.

The printed mouthpieces of the secret society *pro aris et focis* and other media allow Judge to chronicle meticulously the shifting views on sovereignty, politics and federalism that were so essential to the rebellion. One of the great merits of this book is to situate these debates within the broader context of the age of revolutions. The author never loses sight of the American and Dutch precedents and how the rebels of the Austrian Netherlands kept an eye across the border on what was unfolding in Versailles and Paris. They did so, not in admiration, but in horror at the radicalism and anti-clericalism of their Jacobin neighbours. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this book is the claim that this mix between a revolt and a revolution was a vital turning-point in shaping Belgian national consciousness. Judge is very careful not to push her claims too far, but it does seem clear that she feels that Sebastien Dubois' work on the birth of the idea of Belgium does not do justice to the events of 1789–91. She may well be correct, but her treatment of this Belgian-ness angle is not always clear. Some additional paragraphs on the political lexicon deployed by the revolutionaries of 1789 would have been helpful. Was the term *Belge* the leitmotif that united these provinces in their anti-Habsburg resistance? Or was it a convenient label drawn from antiquity to describe the gallic ancestors of the southern low countries? More clarity would have been helpful, and some may feel that Judge's approach here is a little teleological and that she over-eggs the proto-national sentiments of the Brabantine revolutionaries who, for the better part of a year, chased the Habsburg out of Brussels and other areas. It is disappointing that the Révolution Liégeoise is not treated in these pages. It is true that the inhabitants of the Prince-Bishopric of Liège were far more radical and anti-clerical than their Brabantine and Flemish neighbours. However, some sort of comparison or treatment would have been fruitful. Perhaps this is something the author might wish to pursue in future publications?

On the whole, this is a highly readable account of a key event in the age of revolutions. It shows how the influence of the American Revolution was felt more in these provinces than in revolutionary France. Judge is masterful in her analysis of the political thought of the Brabantine patriots and in her grasp of the political culture of these rebels. It is a book that should make its way onto many undergraduate reading-lists for courses relating to the eighteenth century. Judge's argument that this was the First Belgian Revolution and that it marked an important step towards Belgian national consciousness will prove controversial, but, even if it is not fully convincing, it will undoubtedly lead to fruitful and vigorous debate.

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